DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 833 JC 010 263

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TITLE	The Critical Impact of Impending Retirements on Community College Leadership.
INSTITUTION	American Association of Community Colleges, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2001-03-00
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Administration; *College Faculty; *College Presidents; *Community Colleges; *Educational Trends; Faculty Development; Futures (of Society); *Leadership; *Leadership Training; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

A synthesis of recent research efforts, including the 2001 American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Survey, this paper highlights trends that have placed community college leadership in peril. Two major issues have combined to create a crisis: (1) community college presidents have been retiring at a high rate--a trend that is expected to continue; and (2) the pipeline for potential leaders is similarly affected, with higher than normal projected retirements over the next 10 years. These retirements lead to a potential lack of leaders to carry on the vital mission of the nation's community colleges. Key findings in this report include the following: (1) nearly half of current community college presidents indicate they will be retiring in the next 6 years; (2) 33 percent of presidents believe that one-fourth or more of their chief administrators will retire in the next 5 years; (3) the skills presidents need in the future will be similar to those needed today, but there will be more emphasis on entrepreneurial spirit, command of technology, and adaptive approach; (4) the average age of people in the most common feeder positions to the presidency is over 50 years old; and (5) mentoring and professional development play key roles in preparing people for leadership positions. (JA)

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The Critical Impact of Impending Retirements on Community College Leadership

By Christopher Shults

Executive Summary

Community colleges are facing an impending crisis in leadership. This paper, a synthesis of recent research efforts including the 2001 American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Leadership Survey, highlights the trends that have placed the leadership of community colleges in peril. Several issues have combined to create this crisis. Community college presidents have been retiring at an alarming rate—a trend that is expected to continue. In addition, the pipeline for potential leaders is similarly affected, with higher than normal projected retirements over the next 10 years. Finally, retirements in faculty are expected to dramatically increase during the next 10 years. All of these retirements lead to a potential void in leaders to carry on the vital mission of the nation's community colleges. Key findings in this report include:

- Nearly half of current presidents indicate they will be retiring in the next six years.
- Thirty-three percent of presidents believe that one-fourth or more of their chief administrators will retire in the next five years; 36 percent feel that at least one-fourth of their faculty will retire in the next five years.
- Presidents believe that the skills they need in the future will remain constant but that there will be more emphasis on the ability to be flexible, to understand technology, and to seek business-and-industry partnerships.
- Three areas cited by new presidents as those for which they feel unprepared include the overwhelming nature of the job, the level of politics involved, and the amount of relationship building they are expected to accomplish.

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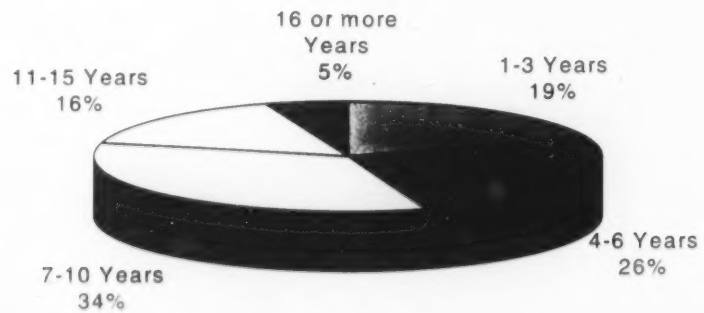
Number of Years Until Retirement Reported by Community College Presidents: 2001



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Introduction

Many community colleges were started in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. People who helped open the doors of community colleges and who, as leaders and presidents of the era, helped transform this uniquely American invention into one of the premier education and training institutions in the nation, are now on the brink of retirement. Additionally, many other long-term senior administrators and faculty who began their careers at that time and who have been integral to the culture and operation for community colleges for 30-plus years are nearing the end of their careers. With the retirement of these leaders, inestimable experience and history as well as the intimate understanding of the community college mission, values, and culture will be lost, leaving an enormous gap in the leadership of community colleges. It is critic[illegible]t future leaders for America's community colleges are prepared for the task they are about to assume. AACC, as the primary national advocate for community colleges, is spearheading an effort to ensure that components are in place for the preparation and support of America's future community college leaders.

Findings from the AACC survey indicate skills critical for future community college leaders, areas from which the leaders will be drawn, and suggest training activities that will be advantageous for future leaders. In addition to surveying presidents, AACC is developing a series of future leadership-related initiatives. These initiatives could include reinstituting the Professional Administrators Development Institute (PADI), cataloguing and monitoring programs on higher education administration, and creating an online clearinghouse of information on leadership programs.

Demographics of the Community College Leadership

The profile for the community college leader has remained fairly consistent for many years. According to a study produced by the American Council on Education (ACE), the majority of CEOs in community colleges are still male and Caucasian (Ross and Green, 2000). As with the American workforce in general, however, this profile is changing. In 1986, 7.9 percent of community college presidents were female; by 1998, the percentage had risen to 22.3 percent. The percentage of minorities in the presidency has risen from 8.6 percent in 1986 to 12.3 percent in 1998. From 1995 to 1998, 34.4 percent of presidents hired were female, and 15.7 percent were minority, an increase over past years that demonstrates a commitment to diversity in the community college leadership.

Increased diversification of community college leadership can be a positive outcome of the leadership turnover. However, presidents are not the only ones affected. Key administrative staff and faculty are also expected to retire at higher than normal rates over the next five years.

Multiple sources confirm the AACC survey findings on future losses in leadership. According to the ACE study (Ross and Green, 2000), the average age of community college presidents in 1998 was 56 years old, while the average age in 1986 was 51 years old. According to the AACC Leadership Survey, 45 percent of responding presidents planned to retire between 2001 and 2006. Results from the survey also indicate that 33 percent of presidents believe that at least one-fourth of their top administrative staff will retire by 2006. A similar percentage of

presidents reported that at least one-fourth of their faculty would retire during this time span. This large number of faculty retirements is also indicated by data from the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2000). These looming retirements present strong evidence of an impending crisis within the leadership pipeline as well as within the presidency. These retirements will create leadership opportunities for a new generation, but they will also leave a leadership gap. In order to fill that gap effectively, new leaders need to be identified and provided with the skills to lead community colleges in the 21st century.

Presidential Skills

Although there is no specific blueprint for leadership, there are skills identified as important for effective leaders. The 2001 AACC survey asked CEOs to identify critical skills based on their professional experiences at community colleges. Financial planning/know-how was the skill most frequently cited as essential for community college presidents. Responses categorized under financial planning/know-how include budgeting and fundraising skills. Other frequently cited critical skills are interpersonal or relationship oriented, such as the ability to forge partnerships, the ability to improve and maintain relationships within and outside the college, and the ability to be an effective communicator. Other skills noted include the ability to develop a clear vision of what the future of the college should be, having political savvy, and adaptability.

The AACC survey asked presidents to identify elements of the presidency they had not been prepared for when they assumed that position. The most frequently cited response was a lack of understanding of the overwhelming nature of the job. The level of politics involved, fundraising and budgeting, and the amount of relationship building they were expected to accomplish were other elements presidents reported being unprepared for. These results are similar to those found in the 1998 ACE survey of presidents of higher education institutions. According to the ACE study, the three areas in which community college presidents hired between 1995 and 1998 indicated they would have liked further training were fundraising, financial management, and working with their governing boards (Ross and Green, 2000).

A 1996 survey by Vaughan and Weisman (1998) addressed another key issue: identifying future skills critical for community college leaders. Skills they identified as important for future leaders include the ability to bring the college together in the governing process; the ability to mediate; having a good command of technology, maintaining a high level of tolerance for ambiguity; understanding and appreciating multiculturalism; and the ability to build coalitions. While these skills are not much different from the skills needed today, the study suggests there will be a greater emphasis on them in the future. The AACC Leadership Survey paralleled the findings of the Vaughan and Weisman study. Presidents indicated that future leaders would need an even more entrepreneurial spirit than they have today, a greater command of technology, and a more adaptive approach than they have today.

Other studies of community college leadership have looked not at skills but at the traits a president must have to be effective. *Community College Leadership in the New Millennium* (Hockaday and Puyear 2000), a paper commissioned as part of the AACC New Expeditions project, examined this issue. Traits identified in that paper as important for community college presidents include the ability to develop a vision of where the college should go, integrity,

confidence and courage, technical knowledge, a collaborative spirit, persistence, good judgment, and a desire to lead. The authors point out that these traits need not be inherent but can be learned or developed.

Professional Development

In order to gain the skills and traits identified as important for effective leaders, individuals in the leadership pipeline must have access to appropriate professional development. The AACC survey asked current CEOs to identify professional development activities that were most influential in helping them to ascend to their current position. Presidents reported a variety of different activities as integral to their attaining a presidency. Formal degree programs, such as community college or higher education leadership programs, were frequently reported as important. Other sources of professional development that respondents cited include shorter-term leadership programs and seminars offered through universities. Presidents also identified association leadership programs such as those offered by ACE, AACC, and AACC-affiliated organizations; state and local leadership programs; and higher education conferences as important for preparing for a community college presidency.

Mentoring also plays a key role in preparing people for leadership positions. Fifty-seven percent of respondents to the AACC survey indicated that a mentor was either valuable or very valuable in helping them obtain their current presidency. An even higher percentage (62 percent) indicated that a mentor was either valuable or very valuable in preparing them for the everyday challenges and tasks of the presidency. As further evidence of the importance of mentoring, 76 percent of CEOs who had been on the job for more than three years indicated they have been a formal mentor in developing the career of a community college professional.

Professional development remains important for community college presidents even after they assume their office. Sitting presidents reported attending a wide variety of professional development activities, offered by many different providers. They reported attending state/local leadership programs, AACC-based programs (e.g., Presidents Academy functions), programs offered by colleges or universities, professional conferences (e.g., accrediting board, national association), and programmatic retreats. Respondents indicated that an additional benefit of professional development activities is the networking opportunity. Many of the respondents also indicated that they were not able to attend as many professional development activities as they would like.

Leadership Pipeline

Faculty retirement looms as large as do presidential and administrative retirements. An important component of the leadership pipeline, faculty members often assume the roles of lower-level administrators such as department chairs and deans who in time fill the roles of upper-level administrators and presidents. Information from the ACE study indicates that many current community college presidents served as faculty at some point in their career. Faculty member, department chair, or dean was the immediate prior position for nearly 14 percent of current presidents and the second prior position for nearly 38 percent of current presidents.

The profile of community college faculty is changing. According to the 1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF:93), more minorities and women are entering the faculty ranks (NCES, 1997). From 1987 to 1992, the percentage of female faculty increased from 38 percent to more than 45 percent. During the same period, the percentage of minority faculty rose from 9.6 percent to 14.5 percent. Preliminary information from the 1999 study (NSOPF:99), indicates that this trend continues.

Demographic information on faculty and administrators indicates that there is a "graying" of the leadership pipeline. A recent Michigan State University study examined the most common feeder positions to the presidency which include:

- Chief student affairs officer
- Business/financial officer
- Director of continuing education
- Occupational/vocational education leader
- Business-and-industry liaison
- Chief academic officer

The average age of people in these positions is over 50 years old. The average age of chief academic officers is 54 years old (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2001). Vaughan and Weisman's (1998) study of presidents found that fewer than 30 percent of presidents ascended to their first presidency after age 50. The aging of people in these feeder positions suggests that more presidents will attain their first presidency after the age of 50.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that the pending retirements in community college leaders and the leadership pipeline pose a critical challenge to community colleges. Needed future skills have been identified. Many professional development activities exist to help teach these skills and prepare future leaders.

But will these programs and activities be sufficient to prepare the community college leaders of tomorrow? With the graying of the leadership pipeline leaving fewer individuals under 50, and colleges preferring to hire presidents who are under 50 (more than 70 percent of current presidents were hired for their first presidency before age 50), will hiring patterns change? With the aging and retirements of a significant number of faculty, who will fill the feeder positions to the presidency? These questions must be addressed to ensure the needed quality and quantity of future community college leaders.

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